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U.S. negotiators leave for Geneva amid hope, caution

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan dispatched his new team of arms control negotiators to Geneva yesterday, declaring that the United States has "set out on a new path toward agreements" to "radically reduce the size and destructive power of existing nuclear missiles."

But the President conceded in a statement at the White House that "we should have no illusions that this will be easy" and that "we know our differences with the Soviet Union are great."

A new round of arms control talks with the Soviet Union is scheduled to open Tuesday in Geneva, 15 months after the Soviets walked out of an earlier series of negotiations.

Reagan pleaded for "patience, strength and unity" as necessities for success, adding: "Like Americans everywhere, I want these negotiations to succeed. ... I pray that the Soviet leadership is prepared to make the same commitment."

Since January, when the two countries agreed to resume talk, Reagan has reorganized his negotiating team. He named Max M. Kampelman, a conservative Democrat, as top negotiator, with former Sen. John G. Tower (R., Texas) and veteran foreign service officer Maynard M. Glitman the two main negotiating subordinates.

Reagan said goodbye to them and a large group of advisers and members of Congress who are accompanying them, with a formal statement for television cameras.

"Since the dawn of the nuclear era, all God's children have lived with the fear of nuclear war and the danger of nuclear devastation," he said.

"Our moral imperative is to work with all our power for that day when the children of the world can grow up without the fear of nuclear war."

He said that above all, the United States seeks agreement "as soon as possible on real and verifiable reductions in American and Soviet offensive nuclear arms."

The United States, he added, is ready "to negotiate fair and equitable agreements reducing the dangers of nuclear war and enhancing strategic stability."

The Geneva talks will include a new category of negotiation on defense and space weapons that will deal with the President's proposal to develop a space-based missile defense system, the Strategic Defense Initiative, nicknamed "Star Wars." The meetings will also deal with long-range strategic arms and intermediate-range nuclear weaponry.

The negotiators left Washington late yesterday and were expected to arrive in Geneva this morning.

White House national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane, who attended Reagan's meeting with the negotiators, said the President told them that the strategic balance between the two countries had gotten "out of kilter" in recent years as a result of Soviet weapons programs.

He also told them that the Soviets had established "a poor record of compliance" on earlier arms control agreements but that the United States should be flexible and willing to "meet the Soviet Union halfway" in the talks, McFarlane said.

Over on Capitol Hill, the administration pressed its case for funds for the MX missile program by linking the issue to the Geneva talks, amid some signs its effort would succeed.

The State Department's top arms control adviser, Paul H. Nitze, warned a Senate panel that the United States would be vulnerable at Geneva without that approval.

Nitze told the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on defense that it is essential that "we convince the Soviets that, as a country and alliance, we stand united."

"Congressional support for the MX will send just such a message to Moscow," he added. "It will send a strong signal of national resolve and will greatly strengthen our hand in Geneva."

Opponents continued to reject the administration's effort to link the MX vote with the Geneva arms control talks.

Former CIA Director William Colby called the weapon "irrelevant" to the outcome of the arms control talks.

And Senate Minority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D., W.Va.) dismissed the argument that rejecting the MX would send a sign of weakness to the Soviets as the same kind of "hot rhetoric" used when U.S. troops were in Lebanon.

It appeared, however, that Reagan's strategy was making major inroads into the opposition. Some congressional sources said the administration's tactic of linking the vote on the missile to the Geneva talks was "masterful." They predicted it would carry when Congress votes this month.

"Six weeks ago I would have said the MX was dead," said one opponent. "Now I'm afraid the President is close to getting it."